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## The Role of Sport in Fostering the Interactions between SCO Countries & Iran

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### ABSTRACT

In the contemporary global landscape, nations strive to portray themselves as modern and open societies, employing various tools, such as art diplomacy, scientific diplomacy, and sports diplomacy, as a compelling facet of public engagement, especially over the past two decades. This study aims to scrutinize the role of sports in interactions of Iran and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The research was descriptive based on qualitative technic that was done by two round Delphi interviews. The participants consisted of 14 experts of sport policy and international relations and the data collection involved an examination of diverse sources, including articles, books, and websites of Google Scholar, Taylor Francis, and Sciences Direct. The qualitative section indicated three concepts of sport diplomatic interactions of Iran and SCO countries included: Economic, Political and Cultural factors. The findings also highlight Russia and China as promising prospects for fostering sports diplomatic interactions with Iran. Sports events that secure medals, notably gymnastics and swimming, benefit significantly from enhanced bilateral and multilateral exchanges within the sports competitions framework among Shanghai Cooperation Agreement nations.

### Introduction

After the Cold war, a uni-polar world order emerged, response was obvious by China, Russia and its neighboring states to counter geopolitical situation (Khan et al., 2023). The emergence of institutionalized organizational cooperation occupies a pivotal space as a regional approach to fortifying collective security and cultivating interactions among political entities (Wang & Kong, 2019). One regional entity addressing these imperatives is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in response to regional security concerns. The proliferation of terrorist activities, separatism, and the surge in drug trafficking prompted collaborative efforts by Russia, China, and the

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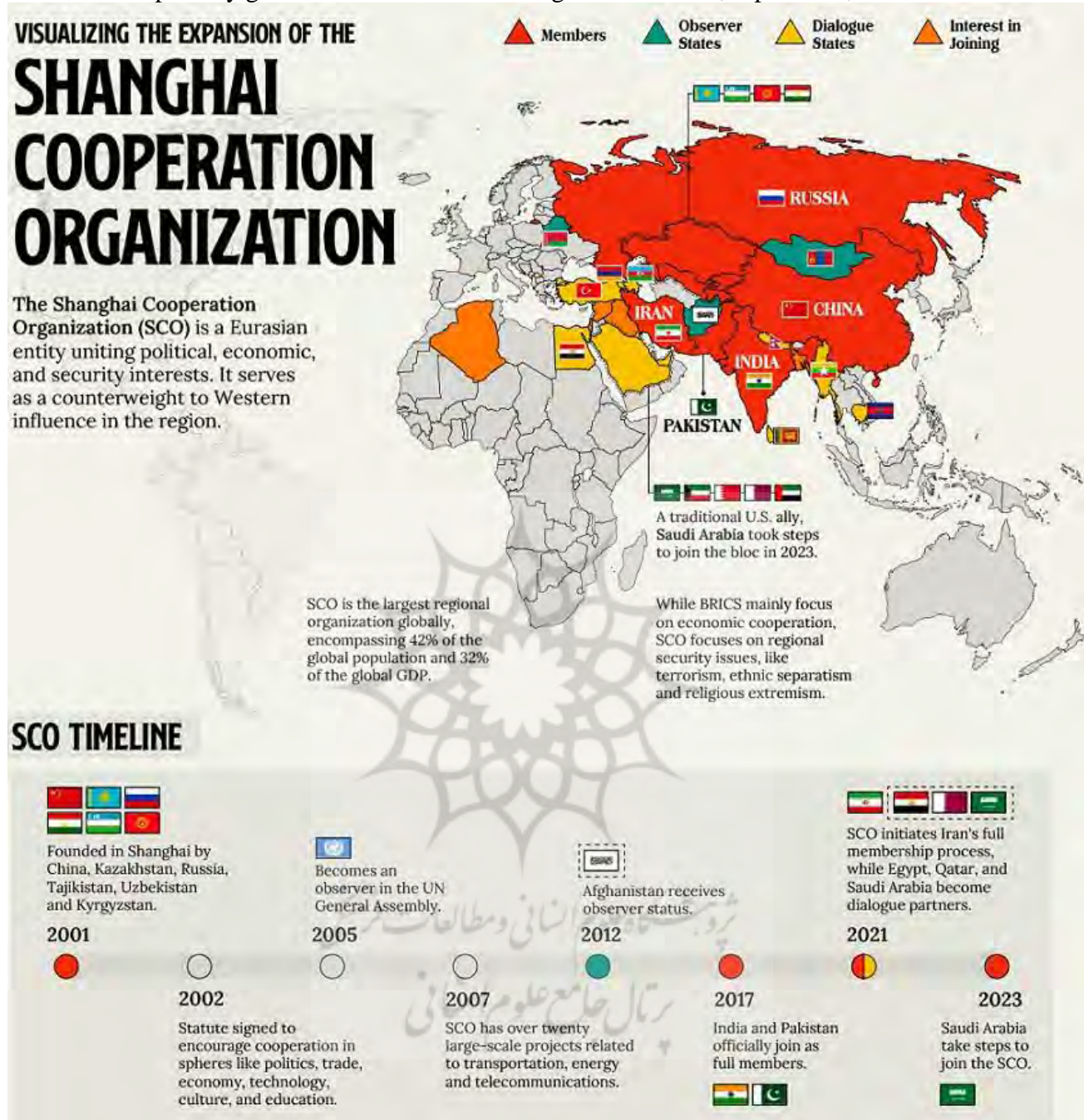


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Central Asian nations to address these shared threats. Regarded by many scholars as the first regionalism in response to non-traditional security threats in the post-Cold War era, this organization expanded its membership to include Iran as an observer in 2004 (Fig. 1), later granting Iran official membership in 2022 (Mirfakhraei & Firouzmandi Bandpey, 2017). The organization's charter articulates its primary goal: the collective combat against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.



**Figure 1.** The Geopolitics and Evolution of SCO (Venditti, 2023)

Gradually, beyond security concerns, the SCO began addressing broader economic and cultural issues. With two of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (Russia and China) as members, the organization boasts substantial capacities, representing over a third of the world's population and significant economic capabilities, indicating the potential for a robust coalition. The inclusion of Russia, the world's largest country, alongside populous nations like India and China, positions this treaty uniquely and provides it with advantages distinct from the NATO treaty (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Daman Pak Jami, 2015).

Iran's policy of "Neither East nor West" during the Cold War's bipolar system and the subsequent continuation of a stance of hostility toward the United States in the quasi-unipolar system post-Soviet Union collapse underscored the strategic choices made by Iran. While a fundamental tenet of Iran's

foreign policy was non-alignment with major world powers, its participation in the SCO marked a strategic shift (Jafari & Hassannejad, 2018). The emphasis on regional interactions by the Islamic Republic of Iran, coupled with efforts toward regional integration, accentuates the role of public diplomacy in enhancing the soft power of nations, particularly Iran (Naroi & Sana'i, 2023). Organized sport in the Islamic Republic, leveraging its human resources and diverse geography, holds unique capabilities on the international stage (Alipour Nadinluie, Nazarian, & Keshavarz, 2021). Recognizing and prioritizing this national phenomenon becomes imperative as it has the potential to influence various economic and political spheres.

In the contemporary context, the preeminent nations within the SCO, particularly Russia and China, have reaped myriad political and economic advantages through their engagement in sports. Notably, China and Russia have showcased their prowess as hosts over the last two decades through diverse and impactful sporting events. This includes staging the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, hosting the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, organizing the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, and orchestrating the 2010 Asian Games in China. These events serve as compelling evidence that these influential nations on the global political stage have adeptly utilized sports to foster the development and stability of their burgeoning economies. Iran, as a political force in West Asia and the broader Middle East region, stands to leverage sports as a strategic tool to effectively uphold and enhance its political-economic interactions within the framework of the SCO (Shariati, 2021).

Throughout their historical engagements with other nations, the Chinese have consistently leveraged sports to bolster their political influence. A notable example of this strategy is the Ping-Pong diplomacy of the early 1970s and how that open relationships with the United States and Japan. From the 1924 Summer Olympics to the 1976 Winter Olympics, China participated in these games as the Republic of China (ROC), while the People's Republic of China (PRC) made its inaugural appearance in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. Notably, the period following the Chinese Civil War marked the sole instance when the International Olympic Committee permitted the concurrent participation of two entities, namely China and Chinese Taipei. Until 1949, domestic unrest and the upheavals of World War II constrained China's active involvement in the international sports arena (Song, 2014 #27). The turning point came in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics when China, fielding 216 athletes, secured 32 medals, achieving a remarkable fourth place worldwide. It marked a transformative moment that altered global perceptions of the nation. Despite grappling with challenges, such as the Taiwan issue in the 60s and 70s, China has adeptly employed sports as a strategic instrument to realize three key objectives (Shariati, 2021):

1. Revolutionary diplomacy
2. Gaining international legitimacy
3. Facilitating international relations

China has demonstrated remarkable prowess in continental sporting events as the world's most populous nation. The inception of Chinese participation in the Asian Games dates back to the 1974 Games in Tehran, where the country secured an impressive third-place finish after Iran and Japan. Since the 1982 Asian Games in Delhi, China has consistently been the flag bearer for the event, consistently standing atop the championship platform in terms of both the quantity and quality of medals. Throughout 12 iterations of the Asian Games, Chinese athletes have garnered a total of 3,187 medals (comprising 1,473 gold, 994 silver, and 730 bronze). In numerous events, the medal count for China exceeds a hundred, exemplified by significant achievements in athletics (461 medals), badminton (107 medals), cycling (104 medals), diving (122 medals), fencing (103 medals), gymnastics (250 medals), shooting (395 medals), swimming (354 medals), table tennis (128 medals), and weightlifting (128 medals). Furthermore, China has consistently excelled in specific events, including wushu, water polo, sailing, rowing, and canoeing, where it has consistently claimed the top spot in total medals on the continental stage.

In addition to the People's Republic of China's remarkable achievements in sports, the nation has distinguished itself by hosting numerous prestigious sporting events, including the Asian Games and the Olympic Games. Despite narrowly losing the bid for the 2000 Olympic Games to Sydney by just two votes, Beijing, under the presidency of Hu Jintao, secured hosting rights for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The event was characterized by the concepts "Green Olympics, High-tech Olympics and People's Olympics," and its grandeur led it to be heralded as the "Olympics of the Century". China's

pro prowess in hosting major sporting events extends to the Asian Games held in Beijing (1990), Guangzhou (2010), and Hangzhou (2022). The pinnacle of China's artistic and organizational excellence was showcased during the meticulously executed 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Beijing also made history by hosting the Winter Olympics for the first time in 2022. This series of successful events solidifies China's standing as an emerging global competitor to the United States in world sports. For the Chinese, sports is not merely a business, recreational pursuit, or form of entertainment but a meticulously planned national project. The government's substantial support for sports, both financially and politically, during the 2008 Beijing Games exemplifies this commitment. Moreover, hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was not solely viewed as an isolated event; it was strategically aligned with the national goal of ensuring the success of the World Expo Summit in 2010 (Shariati, 2021).

As another prominent participant in the SCO, Russia has a rich sporting history marked by various transformations and challenges. From the Soviet Union's initial participation in the Olympics in 1952, following a three-decade hiatus after the 1917 Soviet revolution, to Russia's reappearance in the 1994 Winter Olympics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the realm of sports. Despite the dynamic landscape of world professional sports, with the emergence of countries like China and Great Britain alongside traditional powers such as the United States, Russian athletes have consistently excelled in various events. Russian athletes have garnered substantial success in wrestling, gymnastics, athletics, fencing, boxing, shooting, diving, tennis, cycling, and rowing in the Summer Olympics (Pestereva, Kholina, & Qi, 2019). Meanwhile, in the Winter Olympics, achievements span cross-country skiing, figure skiing, and biathlon. With 547 medals in the Summer Olympics and 121 medals in the Winter Olympics, coupled with hosting major events like the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Russia has positioned itself as a leading nation adept at utilizing sports events for economic and business development. Notably, Russia's engagement in the Paralympics underscores a commitment to disabled sports, evident in the increasing participation of disabled athletes. A standout example is Russia's second-place finish in the medal table at the London 2012 Paralympic Games. The multifaceted roles of sports in the Soviet Union have been summarized through five essential functions (Louis, 2013), including:

- Improving relations with Soviet supporters, cooperating with foreign support groups, and weakening the power of the bourgeoisie and social democracy.
- Promoting good neighborly relations with the states bordering the Soviet Union for strategic reasons.
- Supporting the Soviet Union and its policies among the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
- The Soviet Union and maintaining its state of excellence.
- Obtaining sports successes in the international environment as a nation-state, primarily through the Olympics, to strengthen the Soviet Union outside the communist borders.

Vladimir Putin since 1999 has undergone a transformative period marked by political stability and substantial economic growth over the past three decades. Successfully navigating the economic challenges of the 1990s, Putin has stabilized the Russian economy and extended his presidency until 2036 (Ostapenko, 2010). This prolonged political stability has been paralleled by significant and consecutive growth in Russian sports on the international stage, particularly at the Olympic Games. The presence of sports luminaries like Maria Sharapova (renowned tennis player and the highest-paid female athlete globally), Daniel Kubat (Formula 1 driver), Aleksandr Karelin (accomplished wrestler with four Olympic medals), Lev Ivanovich Yashin (esteemed football goalkeeper), Aleksandr Popov (swimmer with nine Olympic medals), and Svetlana Khorkina (Olympic champion gymnast) has elevated sports such as ice hockey, handball, basketball, wrestling, car racing, volleyball, athletics, tennis, and chess to remarkable popularity among the people of this eastern country, second only to football. However, Russian sports have also faced scrutiny in recent years due to doping controversies and ethical debates. Despite these challenges, Russia has demonstrated its global influence and capabilities by successfully hosting major events such as the 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Researchers have analyzed the cooperation between China and Russia through the

power transition theory. They argue that the liberal international order established by the United States post-World War II was bolstered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, with the emergence of new global powers, including China, and their support for Russia, the nation is once again perceived as a potential challenge to US hegemony in the 21st century. (Alekseyeva, 2014) explores the post-2014 Sochi Olympic Games era, examining the significant impact these games had on reshaping Russia's global image. They assert that the Sochi Olympics successfully mitigated the lingering memories of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, providing an opportunity to present the world with a refreshed and updated view of the new Russia. In a chapter of their book about Olympic education, (Stolyarov & Rodichenko, 2017) investigated the training methods employed by Russians in Olympic events and the subsequent attainment of medals. They highlight the demographic strength of Russia, boasting a population of 144 million, coupled with more than 60,000 schools. The authors underscore the unique opportunities for fostering physical activity in the country, revealing that at all three educational levels—primary schools (levels 1 to 4), middle schools (levels 5 to 9), and secondary schools (10 to 11)—physical education and foreign language classes are integral components of the curriculum. (Ostapenko, 2010) investigation into the national branding of Russia through the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games emphasizes Sochi's selection as the host city in southern Russia as an integral component of the country's international prestige project. Following the international community's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, hosting the Games in Sochi presented Russia with a strategic opportunity to reclaim and enhance its global image. (Müller & Gaffney, 2018) analyzed the effects of hosting major sporting events, specifically the World Cup and the Olympic Games, from 2010 to 2016. Their study focused on the development of cities and countries that hosted six significant sports events: Vancouver (2010), London (2012), Brazil (2014), Rio (2016), and South Africa (2010), and the democratization causes leading to increased growth and development in these regions. In a comparative study, (Andersson, Bengtsson, & Svensson, 2021) explored the effects of hosting the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, the 2018 World Cup in Russia, and the 2016 European Football Championship on the image of these destinations. The study, utilizing a researcher's questionnaire and insights from football enthusiasts on Facebook networks, indicated that, except for Qatar, which faced challenges related to the participation of Swedish citizens, other hosts successfully positioned themselves as attractive tourist destinations. (Arnold, 2021), in a chapter of a book about Russia and the 2018 World Cup, explores the relationship between sports and national soft power in Russia. The chapter emphasizes the significance of sports in driving social changes within the country. It posits that one of the critical motivations for Russian political decision-makers to embrace hosting major sports events is the belief in their role in shaping the nation's soft power and fostering positive social transformations.

India's aspiration to emerge as a developed economic power has driven it to adopt a proactive stance in its economic diplomacy. Recognizing that a portion of India's economic growth and development hinges on its diplomatic efforts in the economic sphere, the nation has actively engaged in economic diplomacy (Naroi & Sana'i, 2023). This strategic shift has propelled India into the ranks of the world's fastest-growing economies. According to studies conducted by the McKinsey Institute, India's middle class is expected to witness significant expansion, growing from 13 million households in 2005 to a projected 128 million households by 2025. These developments position India to become the fifth-largest market globally.

The ethnic and tribal diversity, coupled with the vast geography of India, has given rise to a diverse sports landscape in the country. Sports hold a significant place in the daily life of India, with a rich history spanning thousands of years. In India, sports are not merely recreational but deeply ingrained in tradition, culture, finance, and entertainment. The Indian people exhibit a keen interest in various sports, following them closely and enthusiastically participating. (Zeimers, Shilbury, & McLeod, 2022), in their article "An Institutional Framework for Governance Convergence in Sport: The Case of India," identify transparency, freedom, social responsibility, and accountability as the foundational principles of Western sports governance. They assert that considering organizational actors, organizational context, and national context at three levels is crucial for effective governance convergence in Indian sports. The popularity of sports is further enhanced by the broadcast of live events on over 600 television channels, with cricket reigning supreme as the most popular sport among Indians. The Pro-Liver League in India, with its considerable fan base, has attracted many

international sports players, including Iranians, with lucrative contracts. Pakistan, a neighboring country of India, is also a member of the global sports community. Until 1979, the Iranian government had a cultural presence in Pakistan, marked by embassies, consulates, and cultural houses for Persian language classes and the distribution of Persian books. However, the political dynamics between Iran and Pakistan have been marked by challenges post the Islamic Revolution. The ups and downs in political interactions have had an impact on sports. Pakistan has excelled internationally in field hockey, boxing, athletics, swimming, and shooting in the Summer Olympics. Field hockey is Pakistan's official and national sport, with squash and cricket also enjoying significant popularity.

Belarus, once a part of the Soviet Union, witnessed intense battles between Russia and Germany during World War I. Following the Russian Revolution of October 1917, Belarus declared its existence in 1919, only to be invaded by Poland in the same year, resulting in its division between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1921. Belarus suffered occupation by Hitler's forces during World War II, leading to widespread destruction. In 1945, Belarus was annexed to Russia as one of the Soviet republics and declared its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite being of Islamic and European descent, Belarus has maintained close connections with Eastern cultures over many centuries, resulting in oriental characteristics in its culture (Jafari & Hassannejad, 2018). Due to its anti-Western stance, Belarus has established solid ideological ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Belarus is a notable member of the international sports community, consistently ranking among the top 20 participating countries in the Olympic Games. The government of Belarus prioritizes the comprehensive development of physical education and sports as a critical component of its social policy. The country has established over 23,000 sports venues, providing ample professional and amateur sports facilities. Each region boasts a sports hall and an indoor ice arena. In his article entitled "Sport in the Political and Economic Transition in Belarus: State Nationalism and Mega Events," (Næss, 2022) argues that sports in Belarus are centrally followed, contributing significantly to the drawing of the country's cultural identity. According to him, sports serve as a symbol for the national construction of Belarus and play a pivotal role in shaping its geopolitical components.

The Central Asian region, due to its cultural and civilizational connections and its geopolitical importance, has consistently been a focal point of Iran's diplomatic goals in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Dehghani Firouzabadi and Daman Pak Jami (2015). These countries, including Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, share a close historical, civilizational, ethnic, and cultural bond with Iran, setting them apart from other peripheral regions (Mirfakhrai & Firouzmandi Bandapi, 2016). Common linguistic ties, the celebration of *Nowruz*, shared ethnicity, a joint history, and a common Islamic religion are converging concepts that should be strengthened. In the more than two decades since the independence of these republics, Iran has actively pursued diplomatic measures and initiatives to foster practical and constructive cooperation with its northern neighbors (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Daman Pak Jami, 2015). However, sports, as a phenomenon, has been relatively overlooked in these countries' political and cultural interactions (Ghanbari, Honari, Salimi, & Ghafouri, 2023). For instance, Kazakhstan, emerging as a power in Asia, has achieved numerous titles in the Asian Games in various sports such as boxing, sailing, and athletics. Consistently ranking fourth in the Asian Games, Kazakhstan competes with China, Japan, and South Korea to take Iran's place in the overall ranking. Kazakhstan's prowess is evident in its continuous participation in the Olympic Games, hosting the 2011 Asian Winter Games in Astana and Almaty and bidding for the Winter Olympic Games in 2014 and 2022. Known for its strength in boxing, cycling, and ice hockey in Asia, Kazakhstan has become a formidable force in the sporting arena. Other countries in this region, including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia, have produced individual stars who have won medals in various sports events. It has enabled Iran to extend its sports influence, sending renowned coaches and athletes to these countries and organizing joint camps, such as hosting Afghan track and field athletes in Iran. The exchange of sports expertise strengthens diplomatic ties and cultural interactions among these nations.

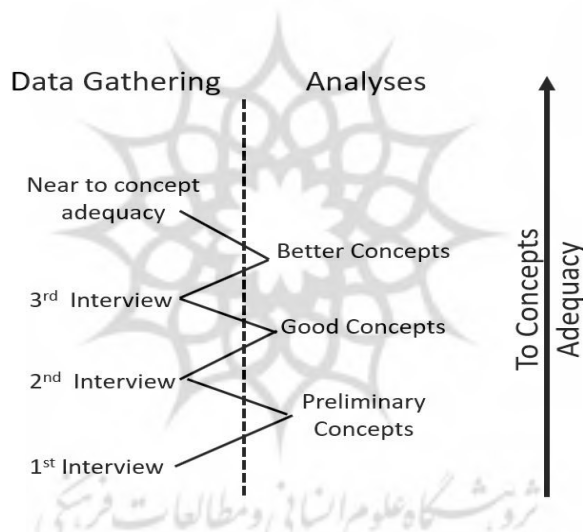
The SCO emerges as a significant player in the future, particularly in fostering coherent cooperation in economic and social fields. The intricacies of Iran's foreign policy, compounded by political complexities, have led to a relative neglect of public diplomacy, including sports diplomacy, on the international stage. This need is particularly pronounced in engaging with Eastern countries,

with the SCO member countries at the forefront. In fact, the current research tried to use converging policies of Iran and SCO as facilitator to develop the sport interactions. Consequently, this research aims to investigate the concepts of sport diplomacy between SCO and Iran? Next, which sports events have the potential to pave the way for diplomatic sports interactions with the member countries of this agreement?

## Methodology

The research utilizes a qualitative methodology, focusing on intellectual categories within the researched group to describe attitudes and behaviors, emphasizing experience and its description (Mohajan, 2018). In interpretiveism, popular knowledge is not dismissed as unscientific, but as a useful tool for explaining the events of everyday life and understanding the rich meanings that people give to their daily lives. In other words, the meanings that people use in their daily interactions are embedded in their popular knowledge, and understanding their world is not possible except through understanding popular knowledge.

Snowball sampling method was used for sampling. To estimate the sample size, the sampling process continues to the point where theoretical saturation is achieved. This means that by selecting the zigzags of the interviewees and then implementing and analyzing them immediately, this process is repeated so that no new findings are added to the previous ones. Therefore, the present study reached theoretical saturation after 14 interviews (Table 1), the same number of which was used as a study sample (Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** The process of zigzag movement to reach adequacy in qualitative sampling

In the first round of Delphi, 1 out of 17 concepts, were recognized as very insignificant indicators, 1 debatable concepts and 15 important and very important concepts (mean score  $>3.75$ ). In addition, given the semi-open questionnaire and the question entitled:

"Shanghai agreement is regarded as the biggest anti-NATO treaty in the world; what role do you think sports plays in fostering the diplomatic interactions between Iran and the Shanghai countries? Do you have a specific example in mind??"

The validity and reliability of this research were evaluated with the contribution of interviewees (Table 1.):

**Table 1.** Validity and reliability of research (Attride-Stirling, 2001)

Validity/ Reliability	Strategy	Method
<b>Validity</b>	Credibility	Research process verification by 2 experts.
	Transferability	Opinions of three sports diplomacy activists who did not participate in the research.
	Verifiability	Recording all interviews.
<b>Reliability</b>	Audit study of the process	Codes extracted from the interview text to 3 participants in the research.
	Intra-subject agreement of two coders	Analysis of two interviews by the researcher and another analyst and identification of similar and dissimilar codes (agreement rate was 86%).

In the second round of Delphi, all the results of the first round were provided to the experts along with a questionnaire; According to experts, in the second round, two indicators were identified as insignificant and the rest (15) as important and very important factors of sustainable environmental security challenges related to sports. According to text, 15 concepts with a mean score higher than 3.75 in two Delphi rounds were obtained as very important and important concepts.

**Table 2.** Demographic feature of study sample

No.	Gender	Age	Position	Major	Degree
1	F	38	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
2	M	55	Dean of Research Institute	International Relations	PhD
3	M	57	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
4	F	49	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
5	M	35	Policy Makers	Political Literature	Master
6	M	32	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
7	M	44	Former ambassador	Political Relations	PhD
8	M	41	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
9	M	69	Faculty Member	Sport Management	Master
10	M	73	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
11	M	50	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
12	M	28	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
13	M	66	Faculty Member	Sport Management	PhD
14	F	44	Vice President of Federation	Sport Management	PhD

In the analysis of texts, the method of thematic analysis has been used. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for analyzing qualitative data and one of the clusters of methods that focuses on identifying the pattern of meaning in a data set. This analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. In particular, the Wagner & Sterberg strategy (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985) has been used. The five-step process includes. 1) Data management: Organizing the selected article and preparing them to start the analysis. 2) Data conflict: In this stage, the basics of data analysis are provided by performing a series of coding, requires attention to several issues, including open coding, theme development, centralized coding. 3) Data mapping: In this step, the categories, themes and patterns found are depicted in the form of data maps and concept diagrams. 4) Development of analysis: Initiation and development of analyzes based on categories and themes and 5) Typology: In the last step of analysis, the researcher categorizes the patterns and classifies them according to differences and similarities. The method of data analysis in this study was such that after preparing and reading the text of selected articles, the key concepts were counted separately for each article. The key concepts were then categorized into secondary subcategories in terms of commonalities and differences to a higher level. In the next step, the secondary subcategories were included in the primary subcomponent set based on the similarities and differences. Then a conceptual diagram of the findings was drawn. To gather data, the research extensively examines scientific works, including



internal books and articles related to the SCO. A naive approach is employed for this purpose. Accessing books and papers involves *Amazon, Google Scholar, Taylor Francis, Scoops, and Springer and Persian Research Engines*. The research also extracts information on medal-winning events of the member countries of the SCO from the websites of the Olympic Council of Asia and the International Olympic Committee.

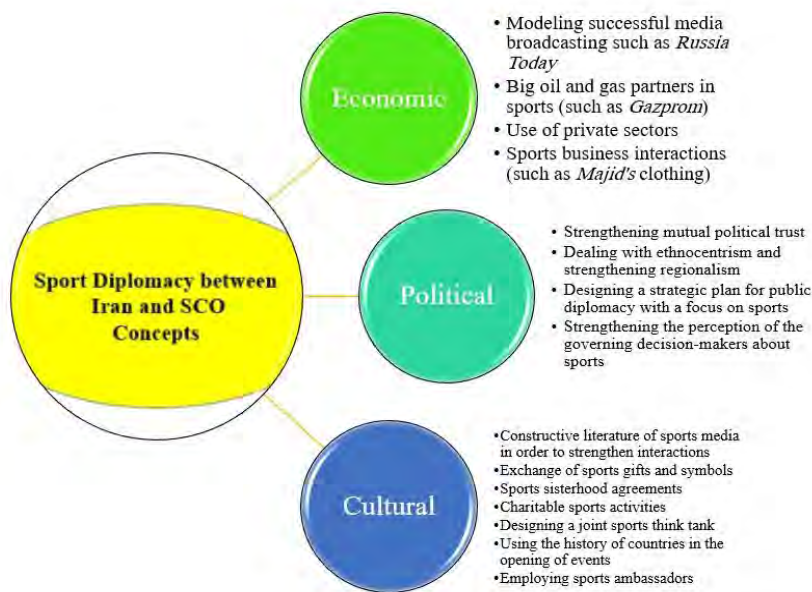
### Results

The primary objective of the research is to provide a comprehensive answer to the question: What role do sports events play in strengthening diplomatic interactions among the member countries of the SCO? The schematic model illustrating the position of sports in the development of diplomatic sports interactions between Iran and the member countries of the SCO, based on studies conducted between 2007 and 2023, is depicted in Figure 1. In interviews with the experts, the economic (4.41) category has the highest average among others; the score of this research was 1-5. The information indicated below:

**Table 2.** The interactive concepts of sport diplomacy between Iran and SCO

Theme	Category	First Average	First Standard Deviation	Second Average	Second Standard Deviation	Sum	Open Coding
Economic	Modeling successful media broadcasting such as <i>Russia Today</i>	4.00	0.83	3.95	0.77	3.97	P1,p8,p11
	Big oil and gas partners in sports (such as <i>Gazprom</i> )	4.58	0.88	4.75	0.89	4.66	P3,p5,p1
	Use of private sectors	4.14	0.52	4.51	0.62	4.32	P4,p7,p9,p10
	Sports business interactions (such as <i>Majid's</i> clothing)	4.73	0.62	4.69	0.74	4.71	P7,p6,p5,p13
Political	Strengthening mutual political trust	4.04	0.66	4.09	0.59	4.06	P4,p6,p8,p14
	Dealing with ethnocentrism and strengthening regionalism	4.01	0.59	4.06	0.62	4.03	P10,p2,p5,p8
	Designing a strategic plan for public diplomacy with a focus on sports	4.42	0.65	4.34	0.75	4.38	P12,p14,p9,p3
	Strengthening the perception of the governing decision-makers about sports	4.04	0.74	3.97	0.71	4.00	P4,p6,p8,p11
Cultural	Constructive literature of sports media in order to strengthen interactions	4.36	0.73	4.41	0.64	4.38	P14,p9,p4
	Exchange of sports gifts and symbols	3.77	0.72	3.63	0.59	3.70	P1,p4,p7,p13
	Sports sisterhood agreements	4.02	0.76	4.05	0.61	4.30	P2,p6,p3
	Charitable sports activities	3.88	0.88	3.95	0.89	3.91	P5,p11
	Designing a joint sports think tank	4.03	0.70	4.02	0.84	4.02	P6,p7,p2,p13
	Use of linguistic and tribal ethnic commonalities (Omitted)	3.87	0.84	3.98	0.70	3.92	P3,p7
	Using the history of countries in the opening of events	3.44	0.62	3.16	0.68	3.30	P4,p12,p3
Employing sports ambassadors	4.81	0.75	4.56	0.69	4.68	P12,p9,p1	

It seems the historical element was not so impressive on sport interactions of Iran and SCO countries. Figure 3 indicated the effective concept of sport diplomacy between Iran and SCO:



**Figure 3.** The Concepts of Sport Diplomacy between Iran and SCO

The quantitative findings and achievements of the member countries of the SCO highlight numerous opportunities for Iran to enhance its performance in championship sports. The member countries excel in various events at the Summer and Winter Olympic Games and the Asian Games. The impressive performance of China, a leading member of the SCO, is particularly noteworthy.

**Table 3.** Comparison of Iran's Performance against China's Participations in the Summer Olympics (1952, 1984-2020)<sup>2</sup>

Olympic	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Gold	Silver	Bronze	All Medals	Number of Athletes	Lexicographic Rank <sup>3</sup>			
Country	China			Iran			China	Iran	China	Iran		
Helsinki 1952	0	0	0	0	3	4	0	7	1	22	-	30
Los Angeles 1984	32	9	8	Boycott			15	-	216	-	4	-
Seoul 1988	28	12	11	0	1	0	5	1	273	27	11	36
Barcelona 1992	54	16	22	0	1	2	16	3	244	40	4	44
Atlanta 1996	50	12	22	1	1	1	16	3	294	18	4	43
Sydney 2000	58	14	16	3	0	1	28	4	271	35	3	27
Athens 2004	63	14	17	2	2	2	32	6	384	38	2	29
Beijing 2008	100	30	22	1	0	1	48	2	639	55	1	51
London 2012	91	22	31	7	5	1	38	13	396	53	2	12
Rio 2016	70	26	18	3	1	4	26	8	412	63	3	25
Tokyo 2020	88	18	32	3	2	2	38	7	406	65	2	27

<sup>2</sup> Iranians have participated in these competitions since the 1948 London Olympics.

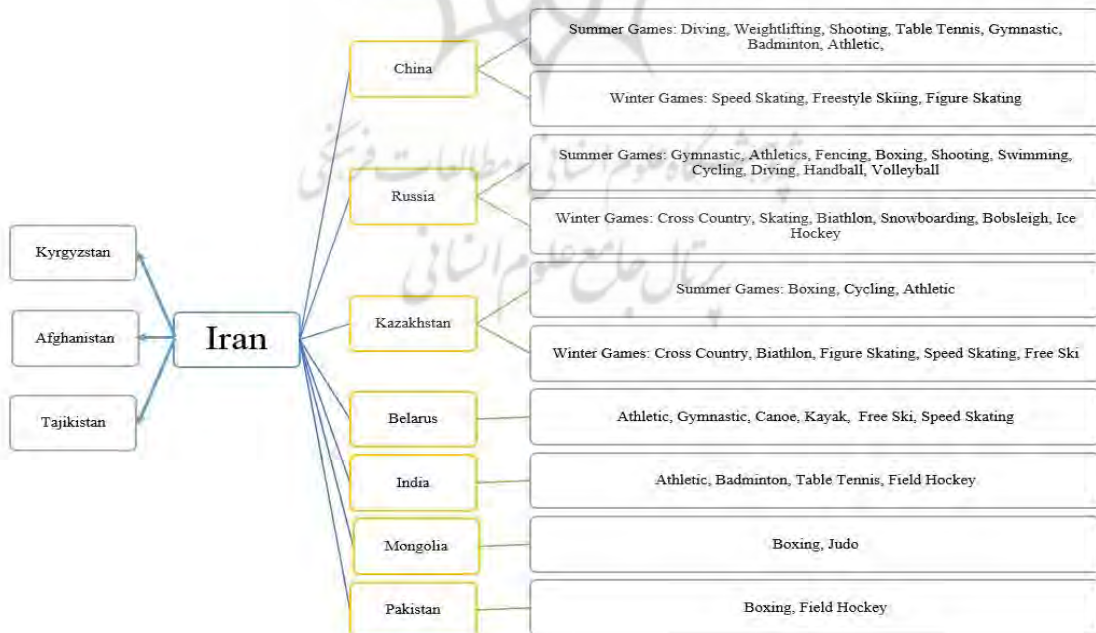
<sup>3</sup> Ranking countries based on the quality of medals; this ranking of a gold medal is infinitely valuable as silver medals (Shariati & Goodarzi, 2012).

Among China's medal-winning sports, diving is the events with the highest number of medals. The performance of Iranian athletes against the Chinese in diving is outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4.** The Most Medal-Winning Sports events of China Compared to Iran in the Olympic Games

Sport	Gold	Silver	Bronze	All Medals	Field	Gold	Silver	Bronze	All Medals
<b>Summer Olympics (China)</b>					<b>Summer Olympics (Iran)</b>				
Diving	47	24	10	81	Wrestling	11	15	21	47
Weightlifting	38	16	8	62	Weightlifting	9	6	5	20
Gymnastics	33	26	25	84	Taekwondo	2	1	3	6
Table Tennis	32	20	8	60	Karate	1	0	0	1
Shooting	26	16	25	67	Shooting	1	0	0	1
Badminton	20	12	15	47	Track and Field	0	1	0	1
Swim	16	21	12	49	-	-	-	-	-
Track and Field	10	12	15	37	-	-	-	-	-
Judo	8	3	11	22	-	-	-	-	-
Taekwondo	7	1	3	11	-	-	-	-	-
Fencing	5	7	3	15	-	-	-	-	-
Boxing	3	5	6	14	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Winter Olympics</b>									
Short Track Speed Skating	10	15	8	33	-	-	-	-	-
Freestyle Skiing	1	6	4	11	-	-	-	-	-

The below figure summarizes the medal-winning fields of the member countries of the Shanghai Treaty. According to Figure 4, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus are considered suitable opportunities for the development of Iran's Olympic sports fields:



**Figure 4.** Empirical Model of the Place of Sports in the Development of Iran's Sports Interactions with the Member Countries of the SCO

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the current global community, sports diplomacy is pivotal in shaping a country's brand as an open and modern government, particularly in major sports events such as the Olympic Games. The success of nations in these events significantly influences public perception and attitudes. In the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran's political alignment with Eastern countries, especially China, Russia, and neighboring nations like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, the SCO and Iran's participation present a valuable opportunity for advancing interactions through sports diplomacy. Therefore, the need to identify the upcoming opportunities, especially in the discussion of the development of championship sports, can cause the problems and sufferings of the country's sports to be diminished in the discussion of establishing joint camps, preparatory opponents, etc.

Over the past half-century, Iran has faced numerous challenges in its foreign policy, with a notable shift in its approach to sports. Before the revolution, Iran sought to bolster its sports infrastructure by engaging Western consultants and models, exemplified by the construction of stadiums like *Shiroudi* and *Azadi* in Tehran. Hosting the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran marked a significant milestone in Iran's sports event organization. Following the revolution and adopting the "neither east nor west" doctrine, the Islamic Republic aimed to use sports to reinforce its national religious ideology. After the end of the war and at the beginning of the construction of the government, the efforts of East Asian countries, especially South Korea and Thailand, in acquiring and holding sports events caused the Iranians to delay the development of sports infrastructure due to the imposed 8-year war. Then, with the beginning of the reform government, they tried to The initial plans for sports constructions, including the new *Naghsh-e Jahan Stadium* in Isfahan, *AQR Stadium* in Mashhad, etc., were started, which were put into operation in the following governments. The involvement of military personnel and politicians in sports has raised questions within the sports community regarding the intersection of politics and sports. Over the past three decades, political events such as the execution of *Sheikh Nimr* in Saudi Arabia and American sports sanctions have contributed to fluctuations in Iranian sports. This study uses the SCO as a framework to explore how sports events can enhance political interactions.

The findings of the present research showed that, from the point of view of the experts, the economic (4.41), political (4.11) and cultural (4.09) concepts were respectively the most important factors affecting the sports diplomacy of Iran and the member countries of the SCO. Economic concepts as the first dimension affecting sports interactions between Iran and Shanghai countries play a significant role in promoting and developing sports activities. It is very clear that sports and especially the "sports industry" is a unique tool in advancing the economic goals of countries, among the countries of the SCO, China can be called the flagship of the sports industry in the world. In addition, the China, as the super power of goods production in the world today, by buying the highest amount of Iranian oil, export the most goods and goods needed to Iran; The total trade between Iran and China reached 30 billion dollars in 2022, which was equivalent to about 26% of the total foreign trade volume of the Islamic Republic this year. On the other hand, China and India have been among the top five destinations for the export of Iranian goods, among which the role of the export of high-quality Iranian sports goods, including *Majid* brand. On the other hand, cheap human resources, along with mass production and conquering the world markets, has caused the China to introduce themselves as the most important exporter of sports items to Iran, which can be done by using the mentioned agreement and the requirements of the federation. The Islamic Republic of Iran's sports facilities provided many of the country's sports issues and problems in the provision of infrastructure and sports equipment, including rifles and arrows in the field of shooting, boats, standard flooring, etc.

The political component was the second most influential factor on the sports diplomacy of Iran and the member countries of the SCO. The position of sports as one of the major components of public diplomacy of countries has caused it to be referred to as "war minus shooting". Nowadays, sports, as one of the soft power pillars of countries, has been able to achieve many political demands in a shorter time, and according to Shariati (2019), just as politicians sit around the table to negotiate, so do athletes to fulfill them. The attitude of political decision-makers and their deep understanding

of sports can encourage the people of the region to be kind and friendly in the form of holding various sports events such as the *Hirmand Cup*.

The cultural factor is the third factor affecting Iran's sports diplomacy with the member countries of the SCO, sports and art as two cultural phenomena attractive and effective to the people have been able to create various events in the world. The use of ambassadors like what Saudi Arabia has done in its 700 billion dollar investment from oil revenues to attract world football stars is a proof of the use of sports to change the national image of a country in the minds of the world. The use of popular national figures in the member countries of the SCO, such as Hamed Haddadi (former basketball player working in China), Sardar Azmoun (popular football player of Zenit Club of Russia), Ali Daei (popular soccer player in Afghanistan, Pakistan, East Asia, etc.) as ambassadors and sports symbols of Iran can strengthen the friendship and interaction between the people of Iran and the member countries of SCO.

The research findings underscore the significant opportunity presented by China for developing Iran's championship sports within the framework of the SCO. After the resolution of the conflict between China and Taiwan in the Olympic Games and the first official appearance of this country in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, the Chinese were always considered one of the top five powers of the Olympic Games. Notably, in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, China surpassed the United States for the first time, securing a position on the championship platform across all Olympic events based on the lexicographic classification (medal quality). The participation of Chinese athletes representing other nations in highly competitive sports such as gymnastics, swimming, athletics, table tennis, and weightlifting highlights the importance of leveraging the SCO to engage with China's sports sector and tap into the country's human resources capabilities to further Iranian sports' national objectives. Despite numerous political and sports-related challenges, including the display of the International Olympic Committee flag in the recent Tokyo 2020 games, Russia has been historically regarded as a critical player in the Cold War. Following the dissolution of *Gorbachev's* government, despite the independence of countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Russia continues to play a significant role in the political and economic landscape of the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement. This underscores the necessity of recognizing the potential of Russia, especially in organizing joint training camps in former Soviet facilities and using their sports infrastructure. Russians, as one of the undisputed sports powers of the world, especially in strength events such as weightlifting and wrestling, in addition to gymnastics, have many points in common with Iranian champions, and winning medals and holding the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics also requires strengthening sports interactions. With this, it doubles the country. Hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup exemplifies the *Putin* government's strategy to leverage sports events to advance political and economic objectives, aiming to attract a growing number of sports tourists, particularly to appealing cities like St. Petersburg and Moscow. Given Russia's status as the largest country globally, spanning from China to America, it presents a potential platform for Iranian winter athletes to capitalize on opportunities, particularly within the skiing federation and its associated organizations, drawing from the wealth of experiences offered by athletes, coaches, and managers in the realm of winter sports. The country uses, in the form of cooperation agreements, to set a new season in Iran's winter sports. On the other hand, Mongolia, another member of the Shanghai Cooperation Treaty, in recent years, in some martial arts, primarily judo, along with its traditional events such as horse riding, has achieved acceptable results in international arenas, especially in the Asian Games.

The countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, heirs of the former Soviet Union, have historically played a crucial role in the sports achievements of the region, especially during the Cold War. Today, these nations have emerged as Asian superpowers in sports like cycling, sailing, and boxing, particularly excelling in the Asian Games. The existing infrastructure and human resources present sports diplomacy opportunities, especially in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. The ethnic, tribal, and linguistic commonalities with neighboring Shanghai Treaty countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan, can be leveraged in public diplomacy to enhance economic and political interactions. Given the impact of this region, sports such as football and cricket can catalyze reducing regional tensions and fostering friendships in border areas. As a member of the BRICS countries, including Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa, India has positioned itself as an emerging global economic powerhouse. The inclusion of India in the SCO has further accelerated its economic growth. While India has long

been a sporting force in Asia, especially within the Commonwealth of Nations, its focus has expanded to leverage demographic capacities for hosting and participating extensively in global sports events. Hosting the 2010 Commonwealth Games, which brought together 64 Commonwealth countries, exemplifies India's commitment to sports diplomacy. The cultural commonality between Southeast Iran and India provides an excellent opportunity to establish joint sports camps, particularly in traditional events like Kabaddi and Kho-Kho. Such initiatives can contribute to a deeper understanding of Iran and India's political and cultural atmospheres.

- Due to political and economic convergence, primarily through the two 25-year cooperation agreements and recent collaborations with Shanghai, there is a growing necessity to utilize sports capacities. It includes summer sports like swimming, diving, weightlifting, shooting, table tennis, gymnastics, badminton, and athletics. Additionally, leveraging sports infrastructure through joint camps in major cities like Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Beijing, which have recently hosted significant sports events, can address challenges in hosting sports camps for Iranian athletes.
- There is a need to provide essential sports equipment, such as boats, bicycles, rifles, bows, and other necessary hardware, through economic-sports interactions between Iran and China, facilitating athletes' access to the tools they need.
- Utilizing the expertise of China, Russia, and Kazakhstan can significantly contribute to the development of Iran's winter sports. It can be achieved through a memorandum of cooperation with the Ski Federation, focusing on Olympic events like skiing, biathlon, ice hockey, snowboarding, and cross-country running.
- Strengthening interactions in power sports, such as boxing, with countries like Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, is essential. It involves tapping into these nations' human capacities and infrastructures through joint training camps and courses.
- Sharing the achievements and successes of Iranian athletes with less developed countries in this pact, such as Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, can be accomplished by hosting coaches, athletes, and sports managers from these countries in Iran.
- Organizing public sports festivals and championships under the title "Shanghai Countries" is proposed to enhance unity and cohesion among member countries.

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